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*[This awareness] is empty and immaculately pure, not being created by anything whatsoever.  
It is authentic and unadulterated, without any duality of clarity and emptiness.  
It is not permanent and yet it is not created by anything.  
However, it is not a mere nothingness or something annihilated because it is lucid and present.  
It does not exist as a single entity because it is present and clear in terms of being many.  
[On the other hand] it is not created as a multiplicity of things because it is inseparable and of a single flavor.*

—Padmasambhava

*How is it that, apart from consciousness, there are no things in themselves?  
Because the so-called “things in themselves,” if examined in the light of reason, do not exist at all.*

—Hsüan Tsang

*Physics is the study of the structure of consciousness. The stuff of the world is mindstuff.*

—Sir Arthur Eddington

### **excerpts from Chapter Six**

## **CONSCIOUSNESS**

From *HOW THE WORLD CAN BE THE WAY IT IS*  
by Steve Hagen

### ***What is Consciousness?***

In Part I, I observed that we try to understand things in terms of their essence, and yet it seems that we can only understand things in terms of their function or relationship to others. And so it is with “things.” “Thingness,” however, is what Consciousness *does*—that is, Consciousness is the source of things and ideas. It breaks down Reality into pieces. It’s the splitting of the Whole into conceived objects.

This is the functioning of Consciousness: an awareness erupts out of the Whole, thus splitting that Whole; and the first thing that gets split off is: “Here *I* am, over here”—that is, Consciousness conceives, along with its object, a subject. It conceives a self. Furthermore, It conceives a self that necessarily sees itself as being opposed to

everything else. In other words, Consciousness spontaneously creates a bogus self-consciousness.

Consciousness creates an “other” which is set apart from “me.” Thus does the fragmentary, particularistic, commonsense point of view emerge from what is otherwise a seamless, boundless Whole. This, then, is the emergence of fragmentary consciousness, the origin of the fragmented mind which, in seeing itself opposed to “other,” enters into perpetual conflict as it attempts to maintain that which cannot be found in Reality—a self.

Consciousness then continues to function, dividing and redividing self from other again and again into finer and finer distinctions, more and more fragments. Thus the whole mental universe erupts into existence in a sort of “big bang,” as it were. In other words, the birthing of existence comes through the working of Consciousness. Yet at every level, the objects of consciousness—including the subject—remain empty of their own being.

### *The Measurement Problem*

Nick Herbert stated in *Quantum Reality* that “It is fair to say that if we could say what actually goes on in a measurement, we would know what physical reality was all about.”<sup>1</sup>

Why such high regard for what constitutes a measurement?

There’s something about the act of taking a measurement that gives us the idea that there exists some fundamental difference between ordinary objects (like people and coffee cups) and quantum objects (like electrons and photons). But what is that something?

Ordinary objects, at least according to our common-sense view, seem to innately possess certain definite attributes such as, say, position and momentum. But these attributes—called “dynamic attributes” as opposed to “static attributes” (such as, say, mass or charge)—cannot be attached to quantum objects without qualification. The dynamic attributes of quantum objects arise only within the quantum object’s “measurement context,” which links the object to the rest of the universe, including any observer or measuring device. In other words, a quantum object’s dynamic attributes are *contextual*. That is, it will exhibit different attributes depending on how you measure it. *Its dynamic attributes, in other words, are jointly shared by the object and the measuring device.* (Ultimately, of course, the measuring device is Consciousness Itself. For simplicity, however, let’s say the measuring device is a conscious being.) Take away the measuring device and the “object” literally does not possess dynamic attributes—i.e., the photon isn’t anywhere and has no motion (or lack of motion) when “no one is looking.” As Herbert put it, “We cannot picture such a state of being, but nature seems to have no trouble producing such entities. Indeed, such entities are all this world is made of.”<sup>2</sup>

But then, of course, we can’t picture it. That’s the point. It’s not being measured—i.e., it’s not registering in consciousness, it’s not being conceived. Nevertheless, we perceive.

Herbert points out that John von Neumann, one of this century’s giants in mathematics, showed that if we “...assume that electrons [or photons] are ordinary objects or are constructed of ordinary objects—entities with innate dynamic attributes—then the behavior of these objects must contradict the predictions of quantum theory.”<sup>3</sup>

So why not reject quantum theory? Because quantum theory is the most successful theory in all science. (Even Einstein couldn’t defeat it, though he tried for many

years.) Yet accepting quantum theory forces us to embrace ontologies which common sense finds absurd. Furthermore, Herbert continued,

if you assume that electrons possess contextual attributes that stem from ordinary objects inaccessible to measurement but whose innate attributes combine ‘in a reasonable way’ to simulate the electron’s measurement-dependent behavior, then these entities likewise must violate quantum theory’s predictions. Thus, according to the quantum bible, *electrons cannot be ordinary objects, nor can they be constructed of (presently unobservable) ordinary objects*. From the mathematical form alone, von Neumann proved that quantum theory is incompatible with the real existence of entities that possess attributes of their own.<sup>4</sup>

In other words, quantum theory is incompatible with our normal way of seeing things.

Yet everything we know and have observed demonstrates the accuracy of quantum theory. Could it be that it’s our normal way of looking at things that is inaccurate? I am suggesting here that this is precisely the case.

According to von Neumann (and Herbert), electrons and other quantum objects cannot be ordinary objects, since they certainly do not—and cannot—behave as our ordinary objects of consciousness appear to behave. Yet every one of our “ordinary” objects (including ourselves) is made up of nothing but these extraordinary quantum objects.

I wish to suggest here that there is in fact no difference between “ordinary” and quantum objects—that *all* objects behave as quantum objects do. Everyday objects only *appear* to behave differently, and this appearance is the result of our rejecting direct perception (what I have called bare attention or *just seeing*) in favor of concepts. Indeed, I am asserting that, in spite of our habitual denials, we actually *do* perceive “ordinary objects” just as we do any quantum event—but we don’t attend to our bare perception alone. Instead we overlay perception with conceptual thought, thus dividing the ordinary and the extraordinary.

In short, the distinction between ordinary objects and quantum objects is an error which results from our habit of packaging our perceptions in concepts. If we would attend well to our perceptions alone, we would find that the world doesn’t actually fit into concepts without yielding contradictions.

Thus it is as John Casti wrote in his *Paradigms Lost* (William Morrow Company, 1989), “The paradox of the quantum realm is that although common sense dictates that the universe exists ‘out there’ independent of acts of observation, the universe does not actually seem to exist ‘out there’ independent of acts of observation.”<sup>5</sup> But we’re uncomfortable with such objectless Knowledge. We want a Real World, to be sure, but we’d prefer to have it with handles on it. We think that there’s no other possible way we can “get it,” in fact. Yet, as we can *see*, if only we’d *look*, whatever we “get” is never It. It’s never the Real Thing we long to have.

The problem with our common-sense view is that it would have us insist upon a break between our “ordinary” view (the “classical” or Newtonian view of the world) and that of the new physics of mind-boggling quantum objects. But though it seems to common sense that there’s a vast difference between the quantum world and our everyday world, no such break is discernible. *Scientists have yet to find any evidence that our everyday world behaves any differently from the world of quantum reality*. As Henry Stapp points out, “the ontology extends in an unbroken way [from the microscopic] to the macroscopic level.”<sup>6</sup>

### *The Unmeasured Solution*

What we call “measurement,” then, is what occurs when consciousness conceives an object and frames it in solid attributes. And from there we begin to analyze and synthesize. Our conceptual experience of this process is to have the sense that we’ve captured or recorded the essence of something. This “something,” which was once dynamic, condenses into a concrete, conceptualized reality, where it now appears as though frozen in time and space. We commonly take the result of this process to mean that we’ve arrived at something “substantial” (as opposed to nothing, as Bertrand Russell might say). But what consciousness has actually done is merely form an abstraction and generate a mental object, a concept.

As we fix on our objects, we carry ourselves deeper into a “this means that” way of thinking and seeing. “This means that” is a way of seeing each thing as being separated out from the Whole and set apart from its “other.” Left unchecked, consciousness continues in this process of measurement and discrimination, thus ultimately degrading consciousness’s own ability to perceive.

An example of this is reflected in the maxim “the best cooks don’t measure.” Good cooks operate on a higher level of perception than do ordinary cooks (at least regarding the textures, colors, and flavors of foods and the use of utensils, heat, storage, etc.) These cooks don’t *need* to measure—their perception and experience are sufficient. They can rely on their direct perception instead of on the concepts of measuring.

The point I want to make here is that whatever it is that makes a “good cook,” it has something to do with the cook’s quality of consciousness. The mere acquiring of know-how isn’t enough. A good cook gains practical knowledge, to be sure, but good cooks must also learn to merge with their objects. We often refer to such a process as inspiration. A good cook has a “feel” of the cheese, the butter, the eggs, the spices, whatever—they understand the life of this stuff, and indeed, are merged with it. Their consciousness has sharpened in such a way that they don’t have to rely on a recipe. They *know* (even bodily) how to make the perfect soufflé. And though outwardly it may appear that they just throw the ingredients together, when they have finished—“voilà!”—out comes a masterpiece.

In the hands of a great cook (or musician, or carpenter, or mother), the quality of life thus rises to a high level.

### *What is Measurement?*

Measurement is an obsession with the objects of consciousness. Yet to the extent that one *doesn’t* measure (or, at least, can operate without measuring)—to the extent one just perceives (which is, in effect, as we shall see, to operate without intent)—more of the universe comes directly into play. To measure—that is, to form a concept—is to not *just see*. Through measuring, we become less and less able to realize *what’s* going on, and we lock ourselves more and more into conception instead of perception. This process occurs with extreme rapidity, and without reflection it becomes habitual.

We don’t usually understand the act of measuring in this way. Rather, we tend to think of measurement as a way to obtain more information about our objects, so that we may better make use of them. We assume that such information is needed to make decisions about how we can further improve our lot. The more information we have, the better will be our capacity to make wise and prudent decisions—or so we believe.

But this is a very questionable proposition. Indeed, I suggest that it’s the very gaining of information through measurement that *limits* perception. One may have

gained “knowledge,” but at the cost of having diminished the ability to directly *see what’s* going on. To gain in information is to remove ourselves, both temporally and spatially, from *what’s* going on. We distance ourselves from Reality, as it were. But it’s impossible to deal with Reality at a distance, for such is already a violation of Reality. To gain in information is merely to sink ourselves deeper into a conceptual reality, and thus do we place ourselves out of touch with what’s going on. We gain information at the expense of wisdom.

The point that concerns us here is that more information does not make us any wiser or more capable of making sane decisions. And though we live in an information age of super-computers which can complete ten billion operations per second, we still can’t seem to get enough information together to help us figure out what we’re doing.

Many of us are beginning to feel that the human world is fast approaching a crisis. With all our knowledge—our ordinary, trivial, common-sense, conceptual knowledge, which is mere access to information—and with our fast communications, we only seem to dig ourselves in deeper.

### ***Order Cannot Be Established***

If you read about owls you’ll soon wonder how mice can survive. But if you just study mice, you’ll wonder how it is that an owl ever manages to catch one, or why we’re not overrun with mice. If we see the whole picture, however, we can see how these two creatures balance their abilities; but if we try to set up that balance ourselves (i.e., by way of our intent) it will only lead to havoc, for this is not the place for us to let volition enter. It would be better if we let Chaos do the regulating and let ourselves simply observe and comply.

Volition’s proper place is in directing us toward *seeing* the work of Chaos and in adjusting our living to fit the grand symbiosis, rather than striving to make everything fit the whims and fancies of small and contradictory propositions called “myself” or “us.”

How we create havoc by imposing our sense of order upon natural systems is well illustrated in a story told by Joseph Wood Krutch in his book *The Grand Canyon*. Krutch lived in the desert of the southwestern United States at a time when sheep ranchers were complaining that the puma (mountain lions) dined on mutton every now and then. The ranchers didn’t feel it was right that they should have to sacrifice an occasional animal as a fee for the services of the puma. Indeed, the ranchers did not even recognize that the puma provided any service at all. They only saw the puma as a disturbance to the type of order they would seek to establish—namely the steady growth in profits from their sheep.

The ranchers pushed for unlimited hunting of the puma. They wanted to exterminate them. Eventually they got their way.

Within the very short period of thirty years, the extermination of the puma resulted in the “laying waste not only of hundreds of square miles of a once flourishing plateau clothed with many different shrubs and small trees but also, in places, serious damage to actual forests.”<sup>7</sup> Once the puma were gone, the deer, now freed from a common predator, began to flourish. As their numbers mounted, they overbrowsed until, driven by near starvation, they began to “eat the shrubbery to the ground and desperately to gnaw the bark from dying trees.” The resulting lack of vegetation, which had once protected the soil against erosion, led to still further disasters.

There was a small area, however, experimentally fenced in before the extermination of the puma. Krutch mentions that after thirty years it “does not seem to belong with the area outside.” Outside the fence, “various species—some...among the handsomest [such as the Gambel oak and the beautiful cliff rose] have completely disappeared...where even the sagebrush is in a dying condition and the junipers have no

branches for a deer to reach.”<sup>8</sup> And many of the species that were not outright exterminated dwindled to numbers below which they could not rebuild their populations. Inside the fence, however, where the deer could not get at them, indigenous plant life flourished.

The ranchers saw the puma as different from the environment. (This is our common-sense view, or proposition #1 of Nagarjuna’s tetralemma—i.e., “a puma is a puma.”) That’s why they thought they could simply remove it and leave everything else, including themselves, unchanged. But is the puma different from the environment? Not really. Is it the same, then (proposition #2)? No, not exactly—we see a puma, and it’s in its environment, but we can talk and think about each, separately. Is the puma, then, both the same *and* different from the environment (proposition #3)? No, for how could we define the “puma”? Is it, then, neither the same nor different from the environment (proposition #4)? No, for now we have even lost sight of what we’re talking about. The fact is, the two are somehow interrelated—indeed they’re somehow interidentical.

So how *do* we explain what we experience as a puma and its environment? The answer is  $r+i$ , the relative and inconceivable roots of the object of consciousness. A puma, as a concept—as an object of consciousness—is merely a unit unto itself ( $r$ ). It’s a “one.” The environment is what we say is *not* the puma—i.e., we negate this “one.” Yet the Real puma is inextricably enmeshed with its environment and with the Whole ( $r+i$ ), with Totality—and so is the consciousness which holds the puma as an object. The Real puma, therefore, is implied by both itself and what it is not.

To put it another way, when we truly *see* a puma, we no longer merely conceive an object. Instead, we directly perceive a relationship, an interdependence, a dynamic interaction which is, indeed, the entire cosmos itself. If we would truly *see* a puma, in other words, we must understand that the whole universe is necessarily involved in our perception.

Like the two-dimensional fellow struggling to grasp the true relationship between the “two” fish, it seems we still have yet to really accept the idea that everything is, in its deepest reality, intimately connected to everything else, like the living organs within a single body.

Wisdom is to realize that we cannot know the Whole—but knowledge of the Whole is precisely what we would need to govern the flow and flux of the Real World. We can’t even predict the flow and flux of our little models of reality (such as the location and velocity of an electron—or, for that matter, next week’s weather). How much more so are we unable to predict the dynamic of the Whole, which comes to reside within every mite and mote of being.

While we cannot know the Whole conceptually, we can recognize It. In this sense, we can *know*. In fact Truth, unlike, say, a “banana squash,” is all that we *can* truly recognize, for Truth, unlike a “banana squash,” isn’t an abstraction. We come with the capacity to recognize the nature of Reality in the constancy of the patterns of Chaos, and in the immediacy of *this*.

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<sup>1</sup> Nick Herbert, *Quantum Reality* (Garden City, New York: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1985), p. 193.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 48.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> John L. Casti, *Paradigms Lost* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1989), p. 25.

<sup>6</sup> Henry P. Stapp, “Quantum Nonlocality and the Description of Nature,” in *Philosophical Consequences of Quantum Theory*, p. 156.

<sup>7</sup> Joseph Wood Krutch, *Grand Canyon* (Garden City, New York: Anchor Books, 1962), p. 188.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 189.